the masculine side. Setting the years from her infancy to her first look into town against those linking that epoch with the present, the former period covered not only the greater time, but contained the mass of her most vivid impressions of life and its ways. But in recognizing her ignorance of the ratio between words to women and deeds to women in the ethical code of the bachelor of the club, she forgot that human nature in the gross differs little with situation, and that a gift which, if the germs were lacking, no amount of training in clubs and coteries could supply, was mother-wit like her own.

27. MRS. BELMAINE'S--CRIPPLEGATE CHURCH

Neigh's remark that he believed he should see Ethelberta again the next day referred to a contemplated pilgrimage of an unusual sort which had been arranged for that day by Mrs. Belmaine upon the ground of an incidental suggestion of Ethelberta's. One afternoon in the week previous they had been chatting over tea at the house of the former lady, Neigh being present as a casual caller, when the conversation was directed upon Milton by somebody opening a volume of the poet's works that lay on a table near.

'Milton! thou shouldst be living at this hour:

England hath need of thee--'

said Mrs. Belmaine with the degree of flippancy which is considered correct for immortal verse, the Bible, God, etc., in these days. And Ethelberta replied, lit up by a quick remembrance, 'It is a good time to talk of Milton; for I have been much impressed by reading the "Life;" and I have decided to go and see his tomb. Could we not all go? We ought to quicken our memories of the great, and of where they lie, by such a visit occasionally.'

'We ought,' said Mrs. Belmaine.

'And why shouldn't we?' continued Ethelberta, with interest.

'To Westminster Abbey?' said Mr. Belmaine, a common man of thirty, younger than his wife, who had lately come into the room.

'No; to where he lies comparatively alone--Cripplegate Church.'

'I always thought that Milton was buried in Poet's Corner,' said Mr. Belmaine.

'So did I,' said Neigh; 'but I have such an indifferent head for places that my thinking goes for nothing.'

'Well, it would be a pretty thing to do,' said Mrs. Belmaine, 'and

instructive to all of us. If Mrs. Petherwin would like to go, I should. We can take you in the carriage and call round for Mrs. Doncastle on our way, and set you both down again coming back.'

'That would be excellent,' said Ethelberta. 'There is nowhere I like going to so much as the depths of the city. The absurd narrowness of world-renowned streets is so surprising--so crooked and shady as they are too, and full of the quaint smells of old cupboards and cellars. Walking through one of them reminds me of being at the bottom of some crevasse or gorge, the proper surface of the globe being the tops of the houses.'

'You will come to take care of us, John? And you, Mr. Neigh, would like to come? We will tell Mr. Ladywell that he may join us if he cares to,' said Mrs. Belmaine.

'O yes,' said her husband quietly; and Neigh said he should like nothing better, after a faint aspect of apprehension at the remoteness of the idea from the daily track of his thoughts. Mr. Belmaine observing this, and mistaking it for an indication that Neigh had been dragged into the party against his will by his over-hasty wife, arranged that Neigh should go independently and meet them there at the hour named if he chose to do so, to give him an opportunity of staying away. Ethelberta also was by this time doubting if she had not been too eager with her proposal. To go on such a sentimental errand might be thought by her friends to be simply troublesome, their adherence having been given only in the regular course of complaisance. She was still comparatively an outsider here,

her life with Lady Petherwin having been passed chiefly in alternations between English watering-places and continental towns. However, it was too late now to muse on this, and it may be added that from first to last Ethelberta never discovered from the Belmaines whether her proposal had been an infliction or a charm, so perfectly were they practised in sustaining that complete divorce between thinking and saying which is the hall-mark of high civilization.

But, however she might doubt the Belmaines, she had no doubt as to Neigh's true sentiments: the time had come when he, notwithstanding his air of being oppressed by almost every lively invention of town and country for charming griefs to rest, would not be at all oppressed by a quiet visit to the purlieus of St Giles's, Cripplegate, since she was the originator, and was going herself.

It was a bright hope-inspiring afternoon in this mid-May time when the carriage containing Mr. and Mrs. Belmaine, Mrs. Doncastle, and Ethelberta, crept along the encumbered streets towards Barbican; till turning out of that thoroughfare into Redcross Street they beheld the bold shape of the old tower they sought, clothed in every neutral shade, standing clear against the sky, dusky and grim in its upper stage, and hoary grey below, where every corner of every stone was completely rounded off by the waves of wind and storm.

All people were busy here: our visitors seemed to be the only idle persons the city contained; and there was no dissonance--there never

is--between antiquity and such beehive industry; for pure industry, in failing to observe its own existence and aspect, partakes of the unobtrusive nature of material things. This intra-mural stir was a flywheel transparent by excessive motion, through which Milton and his day could be seen as if nothing intervened. Had there been ostensibly harmonious accessories, a crowd of observing people in search of the poetical, conscious of the place and the scene, what a discord would have arisen there! But everybody passed by Milton's grave except Ethelberta and her friends, and for the moment the city's less invidious conduct appeared to her more respectful as a practice than her own.

But she was brought out of this rumination by the halt at the church door, and completely reminded of the present by finding the church open, and Neigh--the, till yesterday, unimpassioned Neigh--waiting in the vestibule to receive them, just as if he lived there. Ladywell had not arrived. It was a long time before Ethelberta could get back to Milton again, for Neigh was continuing to impend over her future more and more visibly. The objects along the journey had distracted her mind from him; but the moment now was as a direct renewal and prolongation of the declaration-time yesterday, and as if in furtherance of the conclusion of the episode.

They all alighted and went in, the coachman being told to take the carriage to a quiet nook further on, and return in half-an-hour. Mrs. Belmaine and her carriage some years before had accidentally got jammed crosswise in Cheapside through the clumsiness of the man in turning up a

side street, blocking that great artery of the civilized world for the space of a minute and a half, when they were pounced upon by half-a-dozen policemen and forced to back ignominiously up a little slit between the houses where they did not mean to go, amid the shouts of the hindered drivers; and it was her nervous recollection of that event which caused Mrs. Belmaine to be so precise in her directions now.

By the time that they were grouped around the tomb the visit had assumed a much more solemn complexion than any one among them had anticipated.

Ashamed of the influence that she discovered Neigh to be exercising over her, and opposing it steadily, Ethelberta drew from her pocket a small edition of Milton, and proposed that she should read a few lines from 'Paradise Lost.' The responsibility of producing a successful afternoon was upon her shoulders; she was, moreover, the only one present who could properly manage blank verse, and this was sufficient to justify the proposal.

She stood with her head against the marble slab just below the bust, and began a selected piece, Neigh standing a few yards off on her right looking into his hat in order to listen accurately, Mr. and Mrs. Belmaine and Mrs. Doncastle seating themselves in a pew directly facing the monument. The ripe warm colours of afternoon came in upon them from the west, upon the sallow piers and arches, and the infinitely deep brown pews beneath, the aisle over Ethelberta's head being in misty shade through which glowed a lurid light from a dark-stained window behind. The

sentences fell from her lips in a rhythmical cadence one by one, and she could be fancied a priestess of him before whose image she stood, when with a vivid suggestiveness she delivered here, not many yards from the central money-mill of the world, yet out from the very tomb of their author, the passage containing the words:

'Mammon led them on;
Mammon, the least erected spirit that fell
From heaven.'

When she finished reading Ethelberta left the monument, and then each one present strayed independently about the building, Ethelberta turning to the left along the passage to the south door. Neigh--from whose usually apathetic face and eyes there had proceeded a secret smouldering light as he listened and regarded her--followed in the same direction and vanished at her heels into the churchyard, whither she had now gone. Mr. and Mrs. Belmaine exchanged glances, and instead of following the pair they went with Mrs. Doncastle into the vestry to inquire of the person in charge for the register of the marriage of Oliver Cromwell, which was solemnized here. The church was now quite empty, and its stillness was as a vacuum into which an occasional noise from the street overflowed and became rarefied away to nothing.

Something like five minutes had passed when a hansom stopped outside the door, and Ladywell entered the porch. He stood still, and, looking inquiringly round for a minute or two, sat down in one of the high pews,

as if under the impression that the others had not yet arrived.

While he sat here Neigh reappeared at the south door opposite, and came slowly in. Ladywell, in rising to go to him, saw that Neigh's attention was engrossed by something he held in his hand. It was his pocket-book, and Neigh was looking at a few loose flower-petals which had been placed between the pages. When Ladywell came forward Neigh looked up, started, and closed the book quickly, so that some of the petals fluttered to the ground between the two men. They were striped, red and white, and appeared to be leaves of the Harlequin rose.

'Ah! here you are, Ladywell,' he said, recovering himself. 'We had given you up: my aunt said that you would not care to come. They are all in the vestry.' How it came to pass that Neigh designated those in the vestry as 'all,' when there was one in the churchyard, was a thing that he himself could hardly have explained, so much more had it to do with instinct than with calculation.

'Never mind them--don't interrupt them,' said Ladywell. 'The plain truth is that I have been very greatly disturbed in mind; and I could not appear earlier by reason of it. I had some doubt about coming at all.'

'I am sorry to hear that.'

'Neigh--I may as well tell you and have done with it. I have found that a lady of my acquaintance has two strings to her bow, or I am very much

in error.'

'What--Mrs. Petherwin?' said Neigh uneasily. 'But I thought that--that fancy was over with you long ago. Even your acquaintance with her was at an end, I thought.'

'In a measure it is at an end. But let me tell you that what you call a fancy has been anything but a fancy with me, to be over like a spring shower. To speak plainly, Neigh, I consider myself badly used by that woman; damn badly used.'

'Badly used?' said Neigh mechanically, and wondering all the time if Ladywell had been informed that Ethelberta was to be one of the party to-day.

'Well, I ought not to talk like that,' said Ladywell, adopting a lighter tone. 'All is fair in courtship, I suppose, now as ever. Indeed, I mean to put a good face upon it: if I am beaten, I am. But it is very provoking, after supposing matters to be going on smoothly, to find out that you are quite mistaken.'

'I told you you were quite mistaken in supposing she cared for you.'

'That is just the point I was not mistaken in,' said Ladywell warmly. 'She did care for me, and I stood as well with her as any man could stand until this fellow came, whoever he is. I sometimes feel so disturbed

about it that I have a good mind to call upon her and ask his name. Wouldn't you, Neigh? Will you accompany me?'

'I would in a moment, but, but-- I strongly advise you not to go,' said Neigh earnestly. 'It would be rash, you know, and rather unmannerly; and would only hurt your feelings.'

'Well, I am always ready to yield to a friend's arguments. . . . A sneaking scamp, that's what he is. Why does he not show himself?'

'Don't you really know who he is?' said Neigh, in a pronounced and exceptional tone, on purpose to give Ladywell a chance of suspecting, for the position was getting awkward. But Ladywell was blind as Bartimeus in that direction, so well had indifference to Ethelberta's charms been feigned by Neigh until he thought seriously of marrying her. Yet, unfortunately for the interests of calmness, Ladywell was less blind with his outward eye. In his reflections his glance had lingered again upon the pocket-book which Neigh still held in his hand, and upon the two or three rose-leaves on the floor, until he said idly, superimposing humorousness upon misery, as men in love can:

'Rose-leaves, Neigh? I thought you did not care for flowers. What makes you amuse yourself with such sentimental objects as those, only fit for women, or painters like me? If I had not observed you with my own eyes I should have said that you were about the last man in the world to care for things of that sort. Whatever makes you keep rose-leaves in your

pocket-book?'

'The best reason on earth,' said Neigh. 'A woman gave them to me.'

'That proves nothing unless she is a great deal to you,' said Ladywell, with the experienced air of a man who, whatever his inferiority in years to Neigh, was far beyond him in knowledge of that sort, by virtue of his recent trials.

'She is a great deal to me.'

'If I did not know you to be such a confirmed misogynist I should say that this is a serious matter.'

'It is serious,' said Neigh quietly. 'The probability is that I shall marry the woman who gave me these. Anyhow I have asked her the question,
and she has not altogether said no.'

'I am glad to hear it, Neigh,' said Ladywell heartily. 'I am glad to hear that your star is higher than mine.'

Before Neigh could make further reply Ladywell was attracted by the glow of green sunlight reflected through the south door by the grass of the churchyard, now in all its spring freshness and luxuriance. He bent his steps thither, followed anxiously by Neigh.

'I had no idea there was such a lovely green spot in the city,' Ladywell continued, passing out. 'Trees too, planted in the manner of an orchard. What a charming place!'

The place was truly charming just at that date. The untainted leaves of the lime and plane trees and the newly-sprung grass had in the sun a brilliancy of beauty that was brought into extraordinary prominence by the sable soil showing here and there, and the charcoaled stems and trunks out of which the leaves budded: they seemed an importation, not a produce, and their delicacy such as would perish in a day.

'What is this round tower?' Ladywell said again, walking towards the iron-grey bastion, partly covered with ivy and Virginia creeper, which stood obtruding into the enclosure.

'O, didn't you know that was here? That's a piece of the old city wall,' said Neigh, looking furtively around at the same time. Behind the bastion the churchyard ran into a long narrow strip, grassed like the other part, but completely hidden from it by the cylinder of ragged masonry. On rounding this projection, Ladywell beheld within a few feet of him a lady whom he knew too well.

'Mrs. Petherwin here!' exclaimed he, proving how ignorant he had been of the composition of the party he was to meet, and accounting at the same time for his laxity in attending it.

'I forgot to tell you,' said Neigh awkwardly, behind him, 'that Mrs. Petherwin was to come with us.'

Ethelberta's look was somewhat blushful and agitated, as if from some late transaction: she appeared to have been secluding herself there till she should have recovered her equanimity. However, she came up to him and said, 'I did not see you before this moment: we had been thinking you would not come.'

While these words were being prettily spoken, Ladywell's face became pale as death. On Ethelberta's bosom were the stem and green calyx of a rose, almost all its flower having disappeared. It had been a Harlequin rose, for two or three of its striped leaves remained to tell the tale.

She could not help noticing his fixed gaze, and she said quickly, 'Yes, I have lost my pretty rose: this may as well go now,' and she plucked the stem from its fastening in her dress and flung it away.

Poor Ladywell turned round to meet Mr. and Mrs. Belmaine, whose voices were beginning to be heard just within the church door, leaving Neigh and Ethelberta together. It was a graceful act of young Ladywell's that, in the midst of his own pain at the strange tale the rose-leaves suggested--Neigh's rivalry, Ethelberta's mutability, his own defeat--he was not regardless of the intense embarrassment which might have been caused had he remained.

The two were silent at first, and it was evident that Ethelberta's mood was one of anger at something that had gone before. She turned aside from him to follow the others, when Neigh spoke in a tone somewhat bitter and somewhat stern.

'What--going like that! After being compromised together, why don't you close with me? Ladywell knows all: I had already told him that the rose-leaves were given me by my intended wife. We seem to him to be practising deceptions all of a piece, and what folly it is to play off so! As to what I did, that I ask your forgiveness for.'

Ethelberta looked upon the ground and maintained a compressed lip. Neigh resumed: 'If I showed more feeling than you care for, I insist that it was not more than was natural under the circumstances, if not quite proper. Opinions may differ, but my experience goes to prove that conventional squeamishness at such times as these is more talked and written about than practised. Plain behaviour must be expected when marriage is the question. Nevertheless, I do say--and I cannot say more--that I am sincerely sorry to have offended you by exceeding my privileges. I will never do so again.'

'Don't say privileges. You have none.'

'I am sorry that I thought otherwise, and that others will think so too. Ladywell is, at any rate, bent on thinking so. . . . It might have been

made known to him in a gentle way--but God disposes.'

'There is nothing to make known--I don't understand,' said Ethelberta, going from him.

By this time Ladywell had walked round the gravel walks with the two other ladies and Mr. Belmaine, and they were all turning to come back again. The young painter had deputed his voice to reply to their remarks, but his understanding continued poring upon other things. When he came up to Ethelberta, his agitation had left him: she too was free from constraint; while Neigh was some distance off, carefully examining nothing in particular in an old fragment of wall.

The little party was now united again as to its persons; though in spirit far otherwise. They went through the church in general talk, Ladywell sad but serene, and Ethelberta keeping far-removed both from him and from Neigh. She had at this juncture entered upon that Sphinx-like stage of existence in which, contrary to her earlier manner, she signified to no one of her ways, plans, or sensations, and spoke little on any subject at all. There were occasional smiles now which came only from the face, and speeches from the lips merely.

The journey home was performed as they had come, Ladywell not accepting the seat in Neigh's cab which was phlegmatically offered him. Mrs. Doncastle's acquaintance with Ethelberta had been slight until this day; but the afternoon's proceeding had much impressed the matron with her

younger friend. Before they parted she said, with the sort of affability which is meant to signify the beginning of permanent friendship: 'A friend of my husband's, Lord Mountclere, has been anxious for some time to meet you. He is a great admirer of the poems, and more still of the story-telling invention, and your power in it. He has been present many times at the Mayfair Hall to hear you. When will you dine with us to meet him? I know you will like him. Will Thursday be convenient?'

Ethelberta stood for a moment reflecting, and reflecting hoped that Mrs. Doncastle had not noticed her momentary perplexity. Crises were becoming as common with her as blackberries; and she had foreseen this one a long time. It was not that she was to meet Lord Mountclere, for he was only a name and a distant profile to her: it was that her father would necessarily be present at the meeting, in the most anomalous position that human nature could endure.

However, having often proved in her disjointed experience that the shortest way out of a difficulty lies straight through it, Ethelberta decided to dine at the Doncastles', and, as she murmured that she should have great pleasure in meeting any friend of theirs, set about contriving how the encounter with her dearest relative might be made safe and unsuspected. She bade them adieu blithely; but the thoughts engendered by the invitation stood before her as sorrowful and rayless ghosts which could not be laid. Often at such conjunctures as these, when the futility of her great undertaking was more than usually manifest, did Ethelberta long like a tired child for the conclusion of the whole

matter; when her work should be over, and the evening come; when she might draw her boat upon the shore, and in some thymy nook await eternal night with a placid mind.